

27 October 1977

New CIA image

By ROBERT GREEN

WASHINGTON (Reuter)—The US Central Intelligence agency, tarnished by its involvement in past years in foreign assassination attempts and other unsavory activities, is attempting to improve its image.

Under orders from its Director Stansfield Turner, with the approval of President Carter, it is making a determined effort to win friends among the American people.

As a result the agency that once thrived on secrecy—it even performed experiments with mind-altering drugs on Americans without their knowledge—is now willing to open its doors, at least partially, to journalists and others. A recent example was a visit by journalists to the CIA offices at Langley, Virginia.

Those attending, including two Reuter reporters, were given a briefing on the agency's operations and questioned three officials for nearly an hour.

Those attending had to submit their names two weeks in advance and no foreigners, cameras or tape recorders were permitted.

"We are trying a new openness policy," Herbert Hetu, the CIA's director of public affairs, told the visitors. "We want advice on how better to serve the media."

Hetu was brought into the agency, after 27 years in the US Navy, by Admiral Turner to expand public relations activities. He said he is often frustrated because security prevents him from revealing many of the agency's successes or correcting some of the errors he sees in news reports.

Although the CIA has sometimes given information to selected reporters as background, the official policy has been to answer all questions with "no comment."

Hetu said that had been changed. "We now try to answer as many questions as we can," he said. "If we can't, we try to say why not."

One of the first questions asked at the meeting was the size of the CIA's budget. The questioner was told this was classified.

Hetu said the CIA wanted to get away from the British attitude toward intelligence—an apparent reference to the Official Secrets Act which may be invoked to inhibit publication of matters concerning national security.

Paul Chretien, another CIA official, emphasized that the CIA is part of a team with the departments of State and Defense. He said 95 per cent of the agency's budget was spent on intelligence gathering and analysis.

Much of the information obtained in foreign countries was from foreign nationals working for the United States, he said, adding: "We are not so much spies, but recruiters of spies."

Although the CIA likes to play down the James Bond-type gadgets, Chretien demonstrated a special paper which dissolves in water or can be eaten. He did both.

Hetu said it was against agency policy for CIA officers—they are not called agents, he said—to pose as journalists, clergymen or Peace Corps members as a cover.

The guests were not allowed to tour the headquarters building, although the CIA hopes to begin limited public tours in the near future.

But on the way to the reception after the question and answer period, they were able to walk down part of the main corridor under the close watch of guards and officials.

Parts of the building look like any other government office. There are cafeterias, a library and bulletin boards with notice of a meeting of the Nathan Hale Stamp club. It is named after the American revolutionary war spy who was hanged by the British and whose last words were, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

But another section of the corridor illustrated how the work of the CIA differs from that of other government agencies.

It displayed the medals given to employees for outstanding service, including one awarded to employees on duty.